

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION ABOUT UNDERAGE DRINKING

A Report to the Community August 2006

INTRODUCTION.

On March 28, 2006, **PREVENT!** hosted its first town hall meeting, “**A Community Conversation about Underage Drinking**,” with over 60 community members in attendance. Held at the Center for Community Health in Vancouver, Washington the **goals of the forum** were to:

- Increase our understanding about underage drinking in Clark County;
- Identify what’s working to address this issue and what more needs to be done;
- Generate recommendations for action; and,
- Engage the community to take action.



This **Report to the Community** is **PREVENT!**’s “**Call to Action**.” **PREVENT!** is asking all community members to learn more about underage drinking and to take action, small or large, to make an impact on this issue. Recent work done by the National Academy of Sciences in an effort to answer the question, “What can be done to address underage drinking?” reached the conclusion that it cannot be successfully addressed by focusing on youth alone. Their report states . . .

“ . . . youth drink within the context of a society in which alcohol use is normative behavior and images about alcohol are pervasive. Efforts to reduce underage drinking, therefore, **need to focus on adults and must engage society at large.**”

We believe this report will help you learn more about underage drinking and hope it will compel you to take action. You’ll see that each of us has the opportunity to do so within family, school and community.

WHY FOCUS ON UNDERAGE DRINKING?



“I started drinking and using at the age of 13. At first it was fun, I thought everybody was doing it and I wanted to fit in. Soon it became my life and took over. I want to help others avoid what I’ve gone through.”

Annie Ernst, **PREVENT!** Coalition member, parent,
and Town Hall Speaker

More youth drink than smoke tobacco or use other illegal drugs. This is true across the country and here in Clark County. Underage drinking poses many acute and

long term risks. Traffic accidents/fatalities, injuries, cognitive impairment, addiction, and the related risks of violence, suicide, and educational failure are some of the problems that can arise with underage drinking.

Reducing and preventing underage drinking is critical to securing a healthy future for our youth. If we are concerned about their health and well being we need to do everything possible to discourage them from drinking.

Through **action** we can reduce and help prevent underage drinking and the associated risks.

WHAT CLARK COUNTY YOUTH ARE SAYING ABOUT UNDERAGE DRINKING? _____

"Basically anybody can get alcohol—just by asking their parents, an older friend, or someone they know that has connections."

*Valentine Cook, local high school student
and Town Hall participant*

Here are a few facts on underage drinking drawn from responses to a Healthy Youth Survey (HYS) taken by Clark County students in 2004:*

- Across 6th, 8th, 10th and 12th grades, greater percentages of youth reported drinking alcohol than using cigarettes or other drugs.
- 22% of 12th Grade Students report drinking and driving or riding with a driver who had been drinking.
- 25% of 12th Grade Students reported drinking heavily in the past 2 weeks (5 or more drinks in a row).
- 71% of 12th graders and 34% of 8th graders said it was easy to get alcohol when they want.
- As youth get older they think they are less likely to get caught by the police for drinking.
- As youth get older they also feel their parents see alcohol use in a less negative light, that it's only a little bit wrong or not wrong at all. Between 8th and 12th grade this perception increases from 9% to 21%.



Survey data like this can help us begin to create a picture of alcohol use and perceptions about that use among youth in our community, and offer some clues about how to address the problem. For a more complete picture we also need to consider other data, reports and community perceptions. **Our forum offered us a window into the community's perceptions about underage drinking in Clark County.**

* Full results of the HYS are available on line at: <http://www.clark.wa.gov/youth-family/prevention.html>; a data fact sheet may be included with this report, if not it is available from Pamela Dailey pamela.dailey@clark.wa.gov

WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THE TOWN HALL. _____



What the Problem Looks Like.

Participants were asked to prioritize the top 5 factors they thought most contributed to underage drinking and the top 5 problems that resulted from underage drinking. Here's what we learned:

Top 5 Contributing Factors to Underage Drinking

- Parental/Adult Indifference*
- Peer pressure to drink*
- Easy Availability of alcohol
- Greater acceptance of alcohol use
- Lack of alternatives for kids
- Poor role modeling by adults

Top 5 Resulting Problems from Underage Drinking

- School Dropouts
- Drinking and Driving
- Assaults
- Addiction
- Teen drinking parties*
- Family problems*

* Items received same number of votes

What's working, what is missing or needs to change in our community to address the problem of underage drinking?

Participants also discussed what underage drinking looks like in our community, what's working and what needs to change. The following list collapses that discussion into focus areas with related views, issues and concerns.

Community Focused

- Community denial there is an alcohol problem among our youth
- Societal acceptance of alcohol use among youth
- Need for inpatient treatment options for adolescents
- Increase funding for prevention
- Support evidence-based prevention programming
- Improve partnerships with faith-based programs
- Stop marketing/advertising alcohol to teens
- Stricter laws in court-ordered programs

School Focused

- Prevention/Intervention Specialists in each school
- Organize and/or strengthen substance abuse prevention clubs in schools
- Offer media literacy education
- Update health curriculum; individualize by age group
- Provide character education
- Increase parent involvement in middle school and high school

Family/Parent Focused

- Increase family involvement in addressing the child's problem/recovery
- Parents are in denial we have an alcohol problem with our youth
- Parents contribute to problem by providing drugs and alcohol to their kids
- Help parents know what resources are available
- Offer more parenting classes
- Need parent-to-parent peer pressure
- Parents need to know they need to be a parent as well as a friend
- Hold both parents and teens accountable

Youth Focused

- Involve youth in building a plan to address this issue
- Make youth more aware of free activities that are safe and alcohol/drug-free
- Need for youth mentors to act as role models and friends to young people
- Provide youth with the skills and support they need to steer clear of substance use
- Involve kids in trouble in community service
- Inform youth of dangers and consequences of alcohol use/alcohol overdose
- Youth-focused DUI consequences
- Youth-focused victim's panel to hear directly what their drinking does to harm others
- Educational field trips to jail, detox, etc.

These contributing factors, resulting problems and the communities perceptions about this issue in general offer all of us the opportunity (whether an organization or individual) to begin to consider how to direct our actions to address underage drinking. **So what can you do?**



CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION...WHAT YOU CAN DO.

"There is not a 'one size fits all' prevention model. A variety of approaches are necessary to meet the needs of a broad spectrum of individuals. Above all, parents need to step up and get involved with their kids on this issue."

Jeffrey L. Brockway, D.Min., NCAC II, Clinical Manager of Solutions Employee Assistance and Chemical Dependency Services, Southwest Washington Medical Center, and PREVENT! Coalition member

We know from the work that's already been done to address underage drinking that there are many actions we can take individually or in partnership with others that have been shown to work. We want to share just a few of those here and recommend places where you can get additional help.

You'll be making a difference in a young person's life when you take action.

As a parent or caregiver

- Encourage your children to talk with you about their problems or concerns.
- Get to know your children's friends; discuss ways your children can avoid drinking when they are feeling pressured by peers; set up guidelines and consequences around alcohol use..
- Talk to other parents about ways to send a consistent, clear message that underage drinking is not acceptable behavior or a "rite of passage."

As an educator

- Find out what factors may be contributing to student drinking in your school or community.
- Determine what steps are being taken within your school system to help young people resist the pressure to drink.
- Educate parents about underage alcohol use and other substance abuse.

In the workplace

- Offer programs for your employees and families that address alcohol and substance abuse problems.
- Learn about community programs that address alcohol use prevention and how you can get involved.
- Support efforts taken in your community to limit underage drinking.

As a concerned citizen

- Find out what educational programs/policies your community has in place to prevent underage drinking.
- Encourage collaboration among public and private schools, community businesses, local government, and law enforcement to develop and enforce all policies related to underage alcohol use.
- Support and become involved in positive opportunities and activities for youth.
- Join your local substance abuse prevention coalition.

As a health care provider

- Be alert to signs of underage drinking during routine physical examinations and office visits, and at times of medical emergencies.
- Talk to parents of youth in your practice about the need to prevent underage alcohol use.
- Use your knowledge and expertise about the dangers of alcohol to support community education and prevention programs regarding underage alcohol use.

As a faith community member

- Get your clergy involved and aware.
- Offer prevention education programs and youth group activities.
- Start a parent discussion group on underage drinking and substance abuse.

For additional information about underage drinking and what you can do, check out:

www.alcoholfreechildren.org; <http://toosmarttostart.samhsa.gov>; www.collegedrinkprevention.gov; <http://thecoolspot.gov>; www.stopalcoholabuse.gov; www.TheAntiDrug.com. For resources in Clark County go to: <http://www.clark.wa.gov/alcohol-drug/index.html>